

PERCEPTIONS ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PASTORAL MARITAL COUNSELLING IN ADDRESSING MARITAL CONFLICTS AMONG CHRISTIANS IN CENTRAL DIVISION, NAROK COUNTY

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Abstract

Many churches have tried to ensure that the institution of marriage remains strong by establishing marital pastoral counseling programmes. Marital pastoral counselling is offered by pastors who may either be professionally trained or not. The trend of broken marriages is on the rise despite the existence of these programs. The purpose of this study was to determine whether marital pastoral counselling was effective in addressing conflicts among Christians in relationships. The study used the descriptive survey research design with a sample size of 81 Christians and 10 pastors. The Christians from each church station surveyed, had attended counselling at least once on issues related to marital challenges. Purposive and stratified sampling methods were used to select 10 churches. Couples and counsellors from the 10 churches selected were involved in filing questionnaires and responding to interview questions. During piloting, questionnaires were administered to 10 respondents in the similar target population. The calculated Cronbach alpha from the pilot study was 0.80 for the pastors' questionnaire and 0.78 for the married couples, which is within the accepted reliability limit of at least 0.7. The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 17.0 for Windows was used for data analysis. Descriptive statistics which included means and percentages were used to present the findings. The research established that marital pastoral counselling is effective in the Central Division of Narok County despite the inadequate training of pastors in this field. The study concluded that despite inadequate training, pastors in the Division were able to offer effective counseling. This could be attributed to years of handling marital pastoral counseling. Their success was therefore not based on training but experience.

Keywords: Pastoral Marital Counselling, Marital Conflicts, Christians

I. Introduction

Marriage was designed to be an institution where couples share life and assist one another to go through the challenges of life. By marrying publicly, the couple is seeking the endorsement, and more importantly, the support of family, community, and friends in the union. This support is particularly critical in times of disagreement or difficulty. However, despite these public weddings more and more couples are seeking to get out of the marriage institution (Karanja, 2010). The church is a significant player in most Christian weddings and therefore has an obligation to keep the couples together. Based on the data available, it is clear the divorce rate among Christians is significantly lower than the general population. People who sincerely follow a traditional religious faith, be it Christian or other, have a divorce rate much lower than the general population. That means strong faith can make a significant difference in religious commitment and practice (Stanton, 2011). Couples who attend church weekly without failure practice serious religious beliefs, praying and reading their religious materials, enjoy significantly lower divorce rates as compared to the general public, according to Bradle (2010), a sociologist at the University of Connecticut. On the other hand, those that identify themselves as Christians but rarely attend church, have been

noted to have a 60 percent divorce rate. It was noted that among people who attend church regularly, only 38 percent have been divorced. Due to the rising number of people who merely go to church but are not committed, divorce rates in the church have continued to rise. The church has therefore initiated pastoral marital counselling to try and restore marriages.

Covey (1999) states, marriage is like the flight of an airplane. He notes that a pilot has a plan on his route long before he takes off. They have fully planed precisely where to pass in order to arrive at their destination in the shortest time possible. However, during the flight, wind, rain, turbulence, air traffic, human error, and other factors act upon the plane. Throughout the trip, there are slight deviations from the flight plan. He notes the pilot's strength lies in his ability to stick to the vision, the plan and the ability to get back on track. The church counselling programmes principal aim is to ensure that despite the many hiccups that occur in the institution of marriage, those in it can cope and move forward and eventually prevent a break-up.

Narok county has a very low divorce rate compared to the more significant rate for Kenya. The 2014 report by the Kenya Bureau of statistics puts Narok divorce rate at 0.295%. However, it is important to note that the divorce rate in rural areas of Narok county and Narok town are significantly different with the latter having a much high rate. Rural Narok has a very high number of polygamous marriages with 69,619 persons in polygamous marriages (KNBS, 2014). This might have contributed positively to low rates of divorce owing to the fact that there is limited interaction of the man with each wife and thus fewer chances of conflict. This was one of the pertinent issues that guided the research to be done in this county. The main reason why the research was focused in central division of Narok county is that there are more monogamous marriages with the urban setting than rural settings. This is not informed by the need to be faithful to one partner but mainly by the prevailing economic situation in urban environments. A survey done at Hope Restoration Church; Total branch; Hope Restoration, Kipangas Branch; and Hope Restoration Olopito Branch, revealed that 20% of the women were divorced and 10% of the men were either divorced or in their second marriage (Unpublished data).

II. Objective of the Study

To determine the effectiveness of pastoral marital counselling in addressing marital conflicts in relationships among Christians in Central Division of Narok County

III. Research Question

Is the pastoral marital counselling offered in churches within Central Division of Narok County effective in addressing marital conflicts in relationships among Christians?

IV. Literature Review

Pastoral Counselling

Relationship breakdown has never been the aim or pursuit of any Christian couple. The lovers must be equipped with ways of ensuring that their divergent views do not result in a two-headed monster steering the family in different directions (Mugongo, 2008). It is therefore the duty of the church to ensure that marriages survive the turbulence that accompanies every marriage. In general, Christian counsellors seek to bring people to a

personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and to help them find forgiveness and relief from the crippling effects of sin and guilt (Chacha & Bowers, 2005). Counselling can stimulate personal growth and development and help people cope more effectively with the problems of living with inner conflict and crippling emotions. Chacha and Bowers (2005), also state that counselling can assist individual family members and married couples in resolving interpersonal tensions or relating effectively with one another and assist persons whose life patterns are self-defeating and causing unhappiness.

In today's society there has been growing interest by social science professionals questioning the benefits of marriage. Although many scholars view marriage positively way and say it enhances the quality of life, others advocate for loosely attached relationships with no legal or religious commitment. This kind of freelance approach in a relationship is growing in popularity, especially in the west where people do not want long term commitments. As far back as the 1980's, research has shown that marriage is strongly associated with people living healthier lifestyles, living longer, acquiring greater financial earning capacity and enjoying improved mental health.

Despite all the social, financial and health benefits that a good marriage provides, many couples are reluctant to seek marriage counselling at critical early stages of relationship breakdown. What typically happens is that one person may want marriage counselling, while the other is resistant to marriage counselling. There appears to be two sides within the dynamics of the marital relationship. On one hand marriage offers people an opportunity to have and to be with that one person who is a friend, partner, lover and fellow life traveller. On the other hand, that same person could become their most bitter enemy. Marriage is both challenging and supportive for both partners who together create something that is larger than the sum of their individual selves (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). By requiring and freely giving commitment, marriage liberates each person to fully become themselves with the knowledge that there is one other person on the planet who will always be fully and totally there for them. The question we therefore ask ourselves is, if marriage is so good for us, why then do nearly half of all married couples set about destroying something so valuable?

Role of the Marriage Counsellor

It is not easy to get married people to tell their problems to anyone. Denial that their marriage is in trouble is part and parcel of the troubled marriage. Every excuse is more acceptable than the awful reality of facing the truth, namely, that the marriage is breaking up (Burke 2007). The marriage counsellor has therefore a very big role of making couples understand and accept the situation in which they find themselves. If they accept their situation, they might be able to accept change. According to Chacha and Bowers (2005), human beings are very complex creatures in their thinking and actions. There can therefore, be no guarantee of change even through the intervention of the most skilled counsellors. They state that the Christian counsellor has an obligation to be familiar with much recourse, including psychological research. There are several key elements that a marriage counsellor needs in order to be effective. A few aspects that the counsellor needs to be armed with are: assist the client to understand him or herself, assist the client understand the need for an abundant life on earth and eternal life in heaven. The counsellor must be able to convince couples that they need to enjoy this life to the fullest even if there is hope for eternal life.

Alan and Donna (2006), state that a counsellor should be able to bring about healthy communication that eventually leads to a solution to the problem. Chacha and Bowers (2005), state that unless there is communication between the counsellor and the counselee, there can be little, if any, real counselling. Supporting and encouraging is an essential role for the marriage counsellor to play. He should be able to create an environment where the counselee is able to talk freely in order to get to the root cause of the crisis. The counsellor must act as a spiritual advisor and his faith and Christian understanding should be brought to play in order to get maximum results out of a counselling session. It is vital that the marriage counsellor incorporates Christian teachings with His knowledge of counselling psychology in order to get the best solution to the matter at hand.

Howard (1984), stresses the need for good interpretive skills. Responses indicating the counsellor's intent are to teach, to impart meaning to the client and to explain why. In this, the counsellor helps the counselee to understand why counselee or the spouse may have reacted in a certain way. Finally, the most important role of the counsellor is to advise the counselee on how to save the marriage and to walk through future crisis which in a normal relationship must occur. There should be indications that the counsellor's intentions are to recommend certain approaches, actions, beliefs, or attitudes as helpful (Howard, 1984). We can conclusively state that the role of the counsellor remains largely a directing role where the counsellor leads the counselee to discover solutions to the marriage problem, he/she faces and the appropriate action to take in future crises.

Role of the Couples Seeking Counselling

Kibera (2012), states that whatever happens in the family, it has to be looked at as a task for the couple, not for one spouse alone. This is the secret of living out the "ours" rather than the "mine" and "yours". "our" means unity; "mine" and "yours" means going separate ways. In a counselling process the most important factor for the couple that attends counselling is communication. Rukwaro (2003), states that, without communication there can be no sustainable organized social life. The healthy performance of any social system, whether it be an organization, community, family or such unit, depends upon the ease and certainty of communication. He adds that for effective communication, there should be feedback. In this case for the counsellor to be of assistance to the couple they should be willing to open up to the counsellor. Kimathi (2003), states once proper communication is established, not only can you let off steam when you are annoyed but you can also help other people help you, when you open up to them. This opening up not only helps the counsellor to understand the extent of your problem, but more often than not helps to clear misconception held by the spouse about the particular situation that has led to the crisis.

Another important role that the counselee has to undertake is listening. Listening as the word sound might seem simple but it is not to be taken lightly. Kimathi (2003), stated that listening seems to be a more difficult art to master than talking. In marriage counselling there is a tendency of one of the spouses to want to talk all the time and at times, interrupt the partner when he/she is talking. The need for the counselee to listen is great because more often than not what is being said might help him understand what he terms as irrational behaviour on the part of the spouse.

A major aspect that couples attending counselling should take note of is letting go of bitterness. Bitterness will greatly affect the effectiveness of any counselling process.

According to Chacha and Bowers (2005), bitterness is the result of an offense towards us, or disappointments which have taken root in the heart, often colouring our thoughts and actions both consciously and subconsciously. It is characterized by an unforgiving spirit and generally negative, critical attitudes. If bitterness is taken into a counselling relationship, the possibility of finding a solution is minimal and therefore it is vital that the couple seeking counselling let go of their bitterness and go into counselling with a clean heart that is ready to forgive. The couple should enter into a counselling relationship because they are in it to save their marriage.

It is a self-defeating venture if one spouse has conceived in his mind that the marriage is beyond salvage. According to Wheat and Perkins (1993), Christian psychologist Paul D. Meier says that they are only three choices for any person involved in an unhappy marriage. One is getting a divorce which he states is the most immature choice. The second is to tough out the marriage without looking for ways of improving it, which he states is also another immature decision but not as bad as the first. The third is to maturely face up to personal hang-ups and choose to rebuild an intimate marriage out of the existing one. The couple seeking counselling should not go to the counsellor expecting solutions but expecting guidance on ways to get solutions themselves, since solutions that the counsellor may come up with may not always work.

IV. Methodology

The study used the descriptive survey research design with a sample size of 81 Christians and 10 pastors. The Christians from each church station surveyed, had attended counselling at least once on issues related to marital challenges. Purposive and stratified sampling methods were used to select 10 churches. Couples and counsellors from the 10 churches selected were involved in filing questionnaires and responding to interview questions. During piloting, questionnaires were administered to 10 respondents in the similar target population. The calculated Cronbach alpha from the pilot study was 0.80 for the pastors' questionnaire and 0.78 for the married couples, which is within the accepted reliability limit of at least 0.7. The Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 17.0 for Windows was used for data analysis. Descriptive statistics which included means and percentages were used to present the findings.

V. Findings

Effectiveness of Counselling in Addressing Marital Challenges

Many churches have counselling programs but they do not know if their services have an impact on the well-being on the congregants. The research sought to establish the effectiveness of these counselling services by posing further questions to the respondents.

Table 1: Effectiveness of Pastoral Marital Counseling in addressing Marital Conflicts.

	N	SA (%)	A (%)	DS (%)	SD (%)
1. Most married couples in our church are aware of the counseling services available.	64	31.3	35.9	15.6	17.2
2. Most couples in our church are seeking counseling services when their marriage is in crisis.	64	43.3	17.9	25.0	49.0
3. The time allocated for counseling at the church is adequate.	62	23.9	34.3	17.9	16.4
4. The church counselor gives us enough time to express your problem.	60	43.3	28.4	3.0	11.9
5. The church counselor has resolved my marital problem effectively.	60	31.3	37.3	14.9	6.0
6. The church counseling is adequate.	60	44.8	38.8	6.0	6.0
7. I would advise my friends to seek counseling in the church whenever they have marital problems.	63	55.2	32.8	3.0	3.0

N = Number of respondents; **SA** = Strongly Agree; **A** = Agree; **DS** = Disagree; **SD** = Strongly Disagree. In this discussion, Aware/Agree = SA+A; Not Aware/Disagree = DS+SD.

Seven questions were asked to gauge the effectiveness of counselling in the churches. It was encouraging to observe that 67.2% of the respondents were aware of the existence of pastoral counselling services in the church. This provides an avenue to seek counsel when the need arises. Also, on a positive note, 61.2% of the respondents seek counselling services when necessary. Although the number of those actually seeking the services is lower than those who know the services exist, the number is still encouraging since over half of the respondents seem to have confidence in the counselling services offered. About 58.2% of the respondents felt that the time allocated for counselling in their churches is adequate while 71.6% of those who attended the actual counselling felt they were given adequate time to express themselves. Another 68.6% of the respondents felt that their problem was effectively handled by the counsellor. This means a very good number of the Christians felt that the pastors were doing a very good job in solving their marital problems. Of the respondents, 83.6% felt that the church counselling services were adequate. A very high proportion (88%) stated that they would advise their friends to seek counselling in church if they had marital problems. This is a huge vote of confidence on the counselling services in the church. On average, 71.2% of the responses are positive towards the counselling services in church. This is interesting because as noted earlier, the pastors have very little training on professional counselling. This good performance may be attributed to the fact that they use most spiritual tactics learnt over the years of handling spiritual matters in resolving marital problems. The responses in Table 1 emphasize the significant correlation between marital counselling and stability in marriage. The findings concur with McManus and McManus (2003), who observed similar patterns. Hanzal and Segrin (2008), and Kirk (2002), further

affirmed the opinions expressed in Narok Central Division regarding the benefits of marital counselling, across the socio-cultural and societal stratum elsewhere.

VI. Conclusion

Despite the inadequate or lack of professional training, most of the pastors in Central Division of Narok County effectively handle marital issues among married couples through the church counselling programmes.

VII. Recommendation

The church ministers who are already practicing should strive to seek further training in professional counselling. Further studies need to be conducted to establish the strategies pastors use in the actual counselling process, which makes them effective despite their lack of training.

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